

Creating Collaborative Partnership With Local Churches to Improve Academic Performance of K-12 Public Schools

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Since their founding, the Black churches have strived to implement and fulfill their missions. These institutions acknowledge the importance to become actively involved in the community as well as engaged in the lives of young people. Black churches are faced with unique challenges every day, however, they provide significant number of resources to the communities at large. In this study, we examine the role of partnerships through local churches and its impact on low performing schools using qualitative methodology. Research shows that low performing schools are influenced positively by partnerships with Black churches.

Keywords: collaborative partnerships, Black churches, community relations, faith-based organizations

Introduction

In recent years, the importance of school community relations and overall school public relations has grown rapidly. The development of sound and constructive relationships between the school and the community are a necessary and natural function of a publicly supported institution in a democratic society. This position arises from a consideration of the public characters of the school and the legal framework within which it operates. It is also supported by the role of public opinion in shaping educational policies and practices. Even though the American way of life is characterized by constant change, these considerations nevertheless form the basis of the decision-making process in the management of public schools, and they exercise an influence on the nature and direction of change (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2005).

Communication is a key element to building effective relationships with external stakeholders. Schools that communicate with their external publics in an organized way have a better chance of receiving public support, minimizing criticism, learning the values and priorities of a community and reducing many functional ideas that will help them educate students better.

Too often in the past, there has been little interaction between educators. Today, however, there is a surge of interest in partnerships between community, faith-based organizations and schools in efforts to improve schools by enhancing student learning and development. This seamless approach combines “inside” expertise with “outside” resources and support, resulting in a dual benefit: expanding services, support and opportunities for young people, while strengthening the school as a universally available public institution for all residents. At their best, these partnerships transform schools into “community schools”, vital centers of life that make

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their facilities and resources available to their neighbors.

Church Role and Mission Versus the Constitution

In 1995, the Clinton Administration released guidelines on school and community partnerships. The guidelines addressed faith-based organizations and schools that were interested in forming partnerships. “Our new guidelines will help them work together on common ground to meet constitutional muster, to avoid making students uncomfortable because they come from different religious traditions, while helping students make the most of their God-given talents”, Clinton said.

A 4-page document, published by the US Department of Education (2003), titled *Guidelines for School Officials, Volunteers and Mentors Participating in Public School Community Partnerships*, lists some dos and don'ts in developing school community partnerships to include:

Things to do:

- (1) Make sure the program has a secular purpose;
- (2) In selecting partners remain neutral between secular and religious groups and among religious groups;
- (3) Select student participants without regard to the religious affiliation of the students;
- (4) Make sure any jointly sponsored activities provided within the partnership program, wherever located, are purely secular;
- (5) Make sure any space used for the program is safe and secure for the children;
- (6) Make sure any space used by the public school for instructional purposes is free of religious symbols;
- (7) Put the partnership agreement in writing.

Things not to do:

- (1) Do not limit participation in the partnership, or student selection, to religious groups or certain religious groups;
- (2) Do not encourage or discourage student participation with particular partners based on the religious or secular nature of the organization;
- (3) Do not encourage or discourage students from engaging in religious activities;
- (4) Do not condition student participation in any partnership activity on membership in any religious group, or on acceptance or rejection of any religious belief, or on participation in, or refusal to participate in, any religious activity;
- (5) Do not reward or punish students (for example, in terms of grades or participation in other activities) based on their willingness to participate in any activity of a partnership with a religious organization.

The guidelines also include reminders to volunteers, warning them not to pray with students, preach about their faith, or prohibit or discourage any activity solely because of its religious nature.

President Bush signed an EO (executive order) in 2001, allowing for increased partnerships between faith-based groups and the government. The EO created a White House Office on Faith-based and Community Initiatives to “help funnel millions of dollars to religious groups working on social problems” (O’Keefe, 2001, p. 1). The order also instructed the 5 cabinet-level agencies (Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Labor, Department of Justice and Department of Education) to lift regulations that had prevented non-profit religious groups from collaborating with the federal government. President Bush asked Congress to make it easier for faith-based groups to compete for federal grants traditionally obtained by secular non-profit groups (O’Keefe, 2001).

Some groups, including African-American faith-based groups, opposed President Bush's commitment, because they viewed his EO as a violation of the Constitution's First Amendment Declaration of separation of church and state. However, in tradition, Black churches have had a cooperative relationship with government. According to a study of 1,236 congregations published in the 1999 *American Sociological Review*, "Nearly two-thirds of pastors from predominantly African-American churches said they would seek government funds for social service projects. That contrasted with a mere 28% of conservative, mostly White evangelical church leaders" (O'Keefe, 2001, p. 2).

For years, these donors shunned religious institutions, worried about the separation of church and state. But now, many have come to believe that churches, by their very nature, can supplement what they see as gaping holes in public schools, providing moral or religious training and treating the whole range of social ills that doom many children to failure. To avoid church and state conflicts, most donors require that funds be used for nonreligious educational programs, filling a gaping hole.

Past and present administrations have recognized the importance of church and state separation; however, they have also recognized the need for faith-based organizations to be included in the development and delivery of educational and social services. Since religious institutions are considered as one of the prime sources of moral teachings in the community, and based on findings that over 50% of all Americans regularly attend church, church involvement in addressing social, political and educational problems would seem appropriate (L. D. Loury & G. C. Loury, 1997). It can be argued that the influence of the church is even greater within the Black community. The Black churches have been long recognized as the oldest and most influential institution founded, maintained and controlled by African American people (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000). These researchers further noted that no other institution in the US can claim the loyalty and attention of African Americans that the Black churches claim.

Low-performing Schools, Community Partnerships and the Church

Schools cannot achieve goals and objectives of the institution alone. Schools are discovering that faith-based and community groups can be important allies in supporting student learning (Roehlkepartain, 2007). Low-performing schools, in particular, need the assistance of community stakeholders to raise student performance (US Department of Education, 1998). Given the importance of the church in the Black community, it is likely that any attempts to introduce educational, social, political, economic development or health programs to disadvantaged or minority communities would require their participation.

In the current political climate, standards-based reform is creating pressure to increase student achievement, a pressure felt most intensely by teachers and administrators. Meanwhile, community builders—community development corporations, neighborhood-based organizations, faith-based groups, settlement houses and others—are starting to include education reform as part of their agenda to develop the community's social, physical, economic and political infrastructure.

In a 2003 study, researchers Mark Regnerus and Glen Elder Jr. demonstrated that when youth from low-income neighborhoods attend church, their academic performance improves. The study, commissioned by the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society, relied on data from the national longitudinal study of adolescent health to examine the relationship between religion and academics in nearly 10,000 students. Regnerus and Elder (2003) found that the poorer the neighborhood, the more church attendance helped kids to improve academically. The findings held true even after controlling for obvious influences, such

as students' relationship with parents.

Regnerus and Elder are not the only researchers to find a link between church and academic excellence. More than 600 studies identified by the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society have also shown the positive effects of religion on physical, mental and social health. In 2002, Loconte and Fantuzzo (2002) conducted a study that focused on social services delivered by faith-based organizations. Leaders at 37 faith-based organizations from 22 states were interviewed. The faith-based organizations worked with public schools, correctional centers, child and family service providers, public housing agencies and juvenile courts. The researchers found that religious organizations met the emotional needs in the lives of youth by building relationships of trust and love. The leaders considered exposure to faith as a crucial part of their effectiveness with youth.

Improving academic performance seems to flow more from "doing" church than merely believing. That is, the church's social life influences youth from poor communities more than doctrine. In neighborhoods where libraries and schools are often depleted and after-school jobs are hard to find, the church is the main resource-rich presence in the community. For instance, Black churches in Leon County, Florida, have been very supportive and attentive to the needs of the children within their communities. These churches recognize the unique problems that exist for children residing in their communities and have sought ways to address these problems through grants, corporate sponsorship, congregational and community support. In an effort to serve the youth in its community, Bethel AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church was the recipient of a Department of Juvenile Justice grant in 2002 that was utilized to provide after-school services (i.e., mentoring and tutoring) for children of elementary and middle schools. Many of the mentors for this program were criminal justice students from Florida A & M University. New Mt. Zion AME Church, located in Tallahassee, Florida, in its efforts to provide school supplies for the children in the community, sponsors an annual pack bag program where children are given back packs filled with the necessary supplies for the new school year. It should be noted that Griffin Middle School, which is located about 0.2 (two tenths) miles South of New Mt. Zion AME Church, performed better than other schools located in disadvantaged communities.

The Black Church: A New Agenda

Those who would save America's inner-city schools are discovering a long-neglected resource: the Black church. From after-school tutorials to summer schools and computer classes to family science activities, Black churches are renewing their historic commitment to education. But now, they are getting money from private foundations and some government agencies that see Black churches as their best link to children in neighborhoods beset by poverty, violence and school failure.

As a retired senior bishop John Hurst Adams of the AME Church observed recently, Black churches are operating essentially on the agenda given to them by their founders. The first agenda of early Black American congregations and of emergent denominations included: (1) the proclamation of the gospel; (2) benevolence; (3) education; and by the mid-19th century, (4) foreign missions (Jones, 2001). The fact that these items continue to dominate the church's mission priorities and stewardship planning may be attributed in part to the continuing marginalization and relative powerlessness of Blacks in American society. It is also in part due to the fact that religious institutions in Black communities have not been sufficiently cognizant of the radical implications that the changing political, economic and social realities have for their life. Bishop Adams's antidote for this institutional inertia is "zero-based" mission planning—An imaginative and valid suggestion.

The church's historic concern for education initially focused on efforts to compensate for the exclusion of Blacks from access to elementary education. After emancipation, the most pressing concern became that of establishing and supporting secondary schools and colleges (Jones, 2001). By 1900, the churches had compiled an impressive record: Black Baptist associations were supporting some 80 elementary schools and 18 academies and colleges; the AME churches were underwriting 32 secondary and collegiate institutions; and the smaller AME Zion denomination was supporting 8 (Jones, 2001).

Historically, the Black Church has been a core institution for African-American philanthropy. The Black Church does not only serve as a faith-based house of worship, but also facilitates organized philanthropic efforts including meeting spiritual, psychological, financial, educational and basic humanitarian, such as food, housing and shelter needs. Most Black churches are community focused, committed to helping the inner city, and are owned and operated by African-Americans (Duran, 2001). Their impact on the Black community, especially as it relates to education, is historically well-documented.

The following examples show ways in which schools have developed collaborative partnerships with churches and other religious organizations:

Between 2002 and 2004, there was a 50% increase in number of faith-based organizations receiving state funding to provide juvenile delinquency prevention services in Florida. These services typically involved educational and character development activities. Following the direction of the federal government, the leadership in Florida recognized the importance and commitment of faith-based organizations in providing community-based social services and encouraged their participation. State agencies were encouraged to solicit faith-based and other nontraditional service providers to compete for grants and other funding sources on an even playing field with other social service agencies.

The University of South Florida, located in Tampa, Florida, has developed a C.L.A.S.S. (church leaders assuring student success) program, designed to promote the collaboration and sharing of educational resources and information between faith-based organizations, community groups and schools.

Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., established a Family Life Center to strengthen and nurture families in the surrounding community, bringing them together for educational, cultural and recreational activities. One of its educational programs is the Male and Female Youth Enhancement Project, designed to stimulate healthy lifestyles in African American youths ages 8-15 in the community by providing them positive role models, socialization activities and educational enrichment.

In Jackson, Tennessee, 10 churches have designed a tutoring program in collaboration with the local school system to serve children residing in public housing and other neighborhoods. Three nights a week, church buses provide transportation to church facilities where 250 volunteers work with 350 children, providing assistance in reading and math. Volunteers from the tutoring program also raise funds to purchase school supplies and then operate a school supply "store" that gives school supplies to students prior to the opening of school.

The 6th Episcopal District of the AME Church (Georgia) launched an America Reads Challenge project with emphasis on rural areas. "Meeting our community in their community" (This is the America Reads Challenge Project) launched a campaign to provide a home library for every family in several rural areas. The 4th Sunday of each month was declared "My new books Sunday". The project culminated in a special learning and recreational event featuring storytelling, reading aloud and a time for children to pick out their new books.

Conclusion

Many national religious organizations are committed to being a part of improving the educational opportunities available to children in the communities that are served by their houses of worship. Together, national organizations, their local affiliates, schools, communities and individuals can make a positive difference in the family's involvement in education and help improve schools by assisting children to achieve high standards. In today's world of expanding educational and technological opportunities, it is more important than ever to find effective and efficient ways to move national initiatives to the local, grassroots level, because that is where the real action takes place, which is helping children learn.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to assist school administrators in low-performing schools in building collaborative partnerships with faith-based organizations:

- (1) Encourage and build collaborations between state and federal agencies responsible for the oversight and delivery of educational services and faith-based institutions;
- (2) Study the feasibility of creating a faith-based institute to serve as a clearinghouse and training hub for faith-based organizations. The institute would also provide programmatic and management training, specific goal and objective measurement, evaluation and documentation;
- (3) Develop strategies to solicit faith-based institutions to utilize their existing resources (i.e., facility, transportation, etc.) to provide needed educational and social services within their community;
- (4) Faith-based institutions must make assisting low-performing schools as part of their mission work.

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